

MP3 PLAYERS

INTRODUCTION

If you travel on public transport, you can't help but notice the popularity of MP3 players. Look around at the passengers on any bus, train or plane, and you'll see that these devices are more widespread than copies of *The Da Vinci Code*. Apple's white headphones are particularly common these days, but with dozens of makes of player available, it's worth considering all your options when you want to buy one yourself.

This month, we've gathered together 16 of the latest MP3 players. We've looked at famous-brand models that cost up to £274 including VAT, but also more affordable players that start at just £24 including VAT. We've put each one through hours of tests to find out which has the best sound quality, which can run for the longest time and which is the easiest to use. Whatever your taste in music, we'll help you ensure your new player is a smash hit.

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Music players may be pocket size, but that's no reason to scrimp on sound quality, stylishness, capacity or ease of use. We test 16 MP3 players that promise to be music to your ears

MUSIC ON THE MOVE

Choosing an... MP3 Player

Before buying an MP3 player, you need to consider where you'll use it and how much music you need to store. MP3 players store music files on solid-state flash memory or small hard disks, and each has its advantages and problems.

If you have a large music collection and want to carry it with you, a hard disk-based player is the best choice. Hard disks offer more storage space for your money than flash memory. A 20GB player should easily hold a typical music collection with room to spare for other things. However, hard disks contain moving parts and can be damaged if dropped or shaken vigorously.

Flash memory is more compact than a hard disk and more resistant to shocks, so it is a good choice if you want a player for sports such as jogging. Unfortunately, flash memory is more expensive per megabyte than a hard disk. In the past, flash storage was typically used by cheaper players, but it's recently moved upmarket into players such as the iRiver U10 and iPod Nano.

supports your files. All the devices tested here will play MP3 files, and nearly all play WMA, but support for more exotic formats such as OGG Vorbis is rarer.

If you plan to buy music from an online store, it's vital that you get the right player. If you buy an iPod, you can buy music only from iTunes and stores that sell music in unprotected MP3 format. Sony's NW-A3000 can play unprotected WMA files, but you can only buy ATRAC3 files for it from the Sony Connect store.

Many of the devices in this review are compatible with Microsoft's Plays For Sure standard, which indicates that they can play protected WMA files bought from online stores such as MSN Music and Napster. Choose a player with download and subscription support if you want to use a subscription-based site such as Napster To Go. You can use Windows Media Player 10 to manage the content of any Plays For Sure device, so you don't need to install the manufacturer's software if you don't want to.

OGGS AND ENDS

Most MP3 players come with software for encoding audio CDs into digital music files, but if you already have a music collection be sure to buy a player that

FEEL THE POWER

All but three of the players in our test contain a rechargeable battery. Most recharge while connected to a computer through its USB port and some also come



with a mains charger. Most players have a standard USB cable for connecting to a PC, but our comparison table on page 96 identifies those that use a proprietary connector.

Our table also tells you how long each player's battery lasted in our continuous playback test. We recommend that you go for a device with a battery life of 10 hours or more, which should be enough for a full day's work and commute. However, many players lasted longer in our tests.

THE SOUND OF MUSIC

MP3 players produce little audible hiss, but some provide better sound quality than others. Check our reviews to see which will give you the best listening experience.

All but one of the MP3 players in this test come with a pair of bud earphones. With the exception of the in-ear pair supplied with the Philips GoGear Jukebox, they all leak music out and allow external sound in. This may help to keep you aware of your surroundings when you're walking, but people around you might not be keen on listening to a tinny, high-pitched version of your latest playlist.

You can improve the sound of most MP3 players by upgrading the headphones, but some players come with a decent pair. We've rated each set of headphones separately in our reviews. Headphones that score one or two stars are likely to need upgrading.

How we test MP3 players

We test each device with a set of assorted MP3 and WMA files that encompass many musical genres. We listen to each with its own earphones, experimenting with various equalisation settings, before trying three pairs of reference headphones. We time how long it takes to transfer nearly 500MB of music to each player using its own software if required, or Windows Explorer if not. Where there is choice, we list the fastest time and the software used.

To test battery life, we leave each player repeating all tracks at a comfortable listening volume and record its output to see how long a single battery charge lasts. Our figures represent a best-case battery life, as real-life operations such as track-scanning drain the battery more quickly.

MOVING PICTURES

Nine of the players in this test have colour screens and can display photos. Many lack the size or sharpness to do pictures justice, but a few are surprisingly practical. Five players can show video files, although most are fussy about the format, resolution and frame rate. Watching movies uses up battery power much more quickly than listening to music, though.

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Flash memory-based players

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SUMVISION

SnowFox XT-105

★★

£24 inc VAT



The SnowFox is one of the most affordable MP3 players we've seen, but instead of built-in memory the player has a card slot for SD or MMC memory cards. Both formats are popular and inexpensive: a 512MB SD costs less than £13, so it's feasible to store themed music collections on several cards.

As you'd expect for the price, this is a simple player with a basic display and controls. It feels fragile and the battery compartment cover is too thin to inspire confidence. You can't browse the player's contents by ID3 tag information or filename; you can only skip backwards and forwards through the contents of a card. It played tracks in the correct folder order, but was the only player that couldn't play the 10.5MB MP3 file in our test.

The SnowFox comes with no music transfer software. Getting files on to the player with Windows Explorer was slower than it was with any other flash device here. Copying music directly to the SD card using our notebook's card reader was more than twice as fast.

This player's headphones are incorporated into a neck strap. Sadly, they don't sound particularly good. They have a wide frequency range, but sound is biased towards the mid-range and has little detail. Using quality headphones improves the player's sound, but you'll need to find another neck strap if you want to wear it.

VERDICT

The SnowFox is an affordable player, particularly if you already have some compatible memory cards. However, there's little else to recommend it.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Affordable and flexible
- ✗ Basic
- ✗ Average sound and battery

FLASH MP3 PLAYER No onboard memory, USB interface
PART CODE XT-105
SUPPLIER www.advancedmp3players.co.uk
DETAILS www.sumvision.com
HEADPHONES ★★

APPLE

iPod Shuffle 512MB

★★★★

£47 inc VAT



This is the third time we've reviewed Apple's smallest iPod since its launch in spring 2005. Its lack of a screen seemed reasonable when other flash players were bigger, and it's still slightly smaller than other players. While it may be getting old, it still looks good.

The Shuffle provides less control than other players. You can't navigate music beyond simple track scans and skipping, and it is slow to respond to key presses. The equalisation settings can't be changed, but the gently boosted bass and treble will suit most people.

All iPods come with Apple's bud headphones, which produce slightly harsh mid-ranges and suffer from a lack of clarity. They're comfortable to wear and look great, but their distinctive design leaks plenty of sound and advertises the connected iPod to potential thieves. Even the most ostentatious users might long for a scruffy black pair on a rowdy night bus.

Like other iPods, the Shuffle doesn't support WMA files and its content can be managed only with iTunes. Most people will quickly build a library of more than 512MB, but iTunes's Autofill option transfers a random selection of music each time you connect the player. This is good if you like to be surprised; if not, you can disable the feature and copy tracks manually.

VERDICT

The Shuffle is affordable and feels extremely solid, but it's very basic. Its rechargeable battery makes it a great choice if you don't need a screen or radio, but we'd recommend Creative's Zen Nano Plus if you do.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Small, strong and stylish
- ✓ Very affordable
- ✗ No screen or EQ

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 512MB capacity, USB interface PART CODE M9724B/A
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.apple.com/uk
HEADPHONES ★★

CREATIVE

Zen Nano Plus 512MB

★★★★★

£53 inc VAT



While the name suggests a player with Apple's iPod Nano in its sights, Creative's Zen Nano

Plus is a competitor to the iPod Shuffle. It has a screen and an FM radio, but no internal rechargeable battery. The two players weigh the same, but an AAA battery adds around 10g to the Creative.

The Zen Nano Plus comes with Creative MediaSource and MSN Music software, but you can copy music across in Windows Explorer too. You can select tracks by navigating the folders on the player, but not by ID3 tag.

This player has few controls, but we found them intuitive. Pressing or holding a simple rocker switch activates functions. It works well but tiny serrations on the rocker quickly made our thumbs sore.

Creative's headphones lack the style of Apple's and want for mid-range and treble clarity, but we prefer their fuller sound. They're unusually big, though, and many of the Labs team found them uncomfortable to wear.

This is the most affordable player with an FM radio in our test, and the radio provided above-average reception. It has the best battery life of the three players that use AAA cells, although we prefer players to use rechargeable batteries as they are cheaper and less wasteful.

VERDICT

The Nano Plus is just as good quality as the iPod Shuffle and it has a screen and radio, too. It's an excellent and inexpensive player.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Great value
- ✓ Small and light
- ✗ No built-in battery

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 512MB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE 70PF163200023
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS <http://europe.creative.com>
HEADPHONES ★★



IRIVER

T30 512MB

★★★★

£69 inc VAT



iRiver describes its 512MB T30 as lawn green, which suggests that it needs a stern word with its gardeners. The player's metallic plastic is lurid, but it's inoffensive to most eyes. Its unusual triangular shape makes it deeper than it looks, but it's still compact.

Like the other iRiver players in this test, the T30 is compatible with both download and subscription content from Plays For Sure sites such as Napster. The player identifies itself to Windows as a Portable Media Device, so its content can be managed using Explorer and Media Player. However, you can browse transferred music only by filename and folder.

The T30 comes with a pair of Sennheiser MX400 headphones, which are comfortable and sound much better than those supplied with most of the players here. Their open design lets plenty of sound escape, however, and doesn't block out background noise.

This player has a line-in port and a sliding keylock switch that's easier to use than the menu-activated keylock on the Zen Nano Plus. It has more buttons, but we found it hard to get the hang of iRiver's cranky menus.

VERDICT

Though a little more expensive than the other simple flash memory players, the T30 comes with headphones that don't need upgrading and supports OGG Vorbis files. Its two-year warranty helps to make it a great choice if you don't need a radio.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Great sound and headphones
- ✓ Good format support
- ✗ Expensive

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 512MB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE 3T305A-EUWGX1
SUPPLIER www.advancedmp3players.co.uk
DETAILS www.iriver.eu.com
HEADPHONES ★★

ADVANCED MP3 PLAYERS

Pebble 512MB

★★★

£79 inc VAT



Manufacturers rarely give products descriptive names, but we're hard-pressed to think of a more apt description for the small, round Pebble. At first glance, it doesn't appear to have a screen, but a blue OLED shines through the silver plastic surface.

The Pebble is tiny and well designed. Its only port accepts headphones with a standard 3.5mm stereo plug and a proprietary USB cable, supplied. Small buttons on either side of the body give access to the keylock and menu functions. There's a four-way navigation rocker, but thick thumbs might trigger it by mistake when aiming for the play button in the middle.

You can copy music to the player using Windows Explorer, but can browse tracks only by filename. The tiny screen displays only seven characters, and waiting for track names to scroll quickly becomes tedious. This frustration aside, the Pebble is surprisingly easy to use.

The Pebble's headphones produce detailed sound, but a bias towards the high mid-range makes them sound tinny. Sadly, we were still unhappy with the player's sound after switching the headphones for a better pair.

Only the DBB setting produced a decent amount of bass, but it also boosted the treble too much. The FM tuner works in comparatively large steps of 0.1 megahertz (MHz), and had worse reception than others here.

VERDICT

The Pebble looks distinctive, but it doesn't sound great or have a long battery life. It costs the most per megabyte of all the players here, and wouldn't be our choice.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Tiny
- ✗ Inferior sound
- ✗ Expensive

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 512MB capacity,
USB interface PART CODE Pebble-512
SUPPLIER Advanced MP3 Players,
0131 273 4387
DETAILS www.advancedmp3players.co.uk
HEADPHONES ★★★

JENS OF SWEDEN

MP-500 1GB

★★★★

€195 (Approx £134 inc VAT)



Jens players are available only through the company's web shop, which lists prices in euros. Delivery charges are reasonable at under £10, but the MP-500 reviewed here is sold without headphones. We tested it with the Koss Porta Pros reviewed on page 37, which cost around £22 from Jens' site.

The MP-500 looks like a fat iPod Nano. Its touch-sensitive controls are white against the black front panel. The sliding keylock on our test model felt loose, but otherwise the player seems solid. It has a separate line-in socket, and is the only device here with built-in speakers. These are clear, but they lack bass and go no louder than is necessary to annoy others.

Even the most tolerant user might find the MP-500's menu system irritating. We had to read the manual to find out how to change the playback mode and we kept switching EQ modes by accident. We found a useful option that switches the speakers on with headphones, plugged in, but we couldn't find it again.

Basic playback and navigation is easy, at least, and the MP-500 is one of the best sounding players here. It produced a clear and balanced sound through all our test headphones.

VERDICT

The headphones supplied with MP3 players are often poor, so it's good to be able to choose a high-quality pair for your player. Without headphones, however, the MP-500 is only marginally cheaper than the iRiver U10, which comes with a great pair of headphones and feels far more polished.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Good sound
- ✗ Confusing menus
- ✗ Pricy with no headphones

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 1GB capacity,
USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE MP-500
SUPPLIER Jens 0046 21 470 5900
DETAILS www.jensofsweden.com
HEADPHONES Not supplied

IRIVER

U10 1GB

★★★★★

£139 inc VAT



iRiver's U10 looks just big enough to accommodate a 1" hard disk, but it uses flash memory for storage. The 1GB model reviewed here holds enough music for a long weekend, but it's expensive for its capacity. The 2GB model costs £35 more.

The U10 is the only MP3 player we've tested that's as easy to use as an iPod. It has hardly any buttons and most of its functions are controlled by an unusual system of rocking the screen up, down, left or right. This makes it incredibly easy to navigate through the U10's menu structure, and it's one of the quickest players to get to grips with. The system's one foible is its counter-intuitive use of up and down to scan and skip tracks.

Windows recognises the U10 as a Portable Media Device, so it's easy to copy music and pictures to it with Windows Explorer. It's compatible with WMA download and subscription music services and plays MPEG4 videos with a frame rate of 15 frames per second or less. The fantastic screen is larger than the iPod Nano's and makes the U10 a far better photo viewer.

iRiver supplies white Sennheiser headphones that have plenty of bass and sound great. The player sounds superb, producing natural and clear music. Its battery lasts long enough to play every song in its memory.

VERDICT

The U10's screen, sound quality and battery life comfortably beat the iPod Nano. It's as easy to use and you can buy music for it from a wider range of online stores. It's a great MP3 player, but it costs too much.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Fantastic sound and battery
- ✓ Stylish, with a great screen
- ✗ Expensive

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 512MB capacity,
USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE 70PF163200023
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS <http://europe.creative.com>
HEADPHONES ★★★★★

APPLE

iPod Nano 4GB

★★★★★

£168 inc VAT



The hard disk-based iPod Mini won a Budget Buy award in our last roundup of MP3 players, but it was quickly replaced by the flash-based iPod Nano. At £168 including VAT, this 4GB model costs more than the 6GB iPod Mini did.

The gorgeous Nano looks like a slimmer version of the full-size iPod. Only that and iRiver's U10 match it for style. The Nano has Apple's circular touch-wheel controller and uses an identical menu layout to the full-size model. It's easy to use, but can be imprecise for small movements.

Although the Nano can display photos, it has one of the smallest colour screens in this test. It has fewer pixels than the U10's display and isn't as bright or sharp. It's fine for showing album artwork, but it doesn't make a great photo viewer and can't display video files.

The black Nano comes with Apple's white bud headphones. They look cool, but you'll need to upgrade them to get the best sound. Even with better headphones, though, the Nano doesn't sound especially good. With the EQ off, high frequencies sound muted and lack clarity. The Nano is one of the few players here with no custom EQ setting and many of its presets introduce distortion to bass.

VERDICT

In terms of price per megabyte, the Nano is the best value of all the flash players. It's more expensive than the Mini it replaced, though, and its sound and battery life aren't as good.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Stylish and easy to use
- ✗ Distorted sound
- ✗ Expensive

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 4GB capacity,
USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE MA107FB/A
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.apple.com/uk
HEADPHONES ★★★★★

SAMSUNG YP-T8Q

★★

£179 inc VAT

The YP-T8Q looks so much like a small mobile phone that absent-minded people might find themselves picking it up to make a call. It's one of the biggest flash players in this test, but it's still quite small and light.

You can copy music, pictures and video to the YP-T8Q using Windows Explorer or Samsung's Media Studio software. Media Studio is easy to use but lets you copy only the contents of a folder rather than the folder itself.

However you get your files on the player, you can browse them only by filename, so Samsung's software is less useful than Explorer. It usually takes longer to copy files to a flash-based player than one with a hard disk, but the YP-T8Q was the fastest of all 16 players on test.

Samsung's headphones feel large in the ear but are more comfortable than those with Creative's Zen Nano Plus. They're better than most, but could do with a brighter top-end. The player lacks the detailed sound of iRiver's U10, but sounded better than the iPod Nano after some tweaking.

The YP-T8Q's FM radio is easier to use than those of many players but its reception is slightly weak. It's one of a few players in the group to support the OGG Vorbis music file format.

VERDICT

This player has a decent battery life, but it's expensive for its capacity and is lacking in many respects. The iPod Nano has no radio, but it costs £11 less, has twice the storage space and is far more desirable.



SUMMARY

- ✓ Decent performance
- ✗ Unimpressive screen
- ✗ Very expensive

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 2GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE YP-T8Q
SUPPLIER www.advancedmp3players.co.uk
DETAILS www.samsung.co.uk
HEADPHONES ★★

MSI Megaplayer 540

★★

£129 inc VAT

MSI's Megaplayer 540 is the only device in this test to use a 1" hard disk. This makes it cheaper per megabyte than the flash players without making it physically as big as players that use 1.8" hard disks. It's the lightest hard-disk player here.

The Megaplayer doesn't look as classy or feel as well made as many other players. Its white plastic case is light, but it doesn't feel solid. It has a decent-size colour screen, but this has narrow viewing angles and isn't very sharp. The control system manages to be both basic and hard to master.

You can use Windows Explorer to copy music on to the Megaplayer, and a plug-in lets you manage its content from Windows Media Player. We tried both methods, but neither seemed to update the player's internal ID3 tag database. We had to choose music to play using the folder structure.

The 540's headphones are the worst in the group, with little bass and a peaky mid range. The player sounded much better through a quality set.

This player moved in very small steps when scanning within a track, making the process frustratingly slow.

Skipping tracks took longer than it does on most players, and we could hear a ticking from the hard disk each time it was accessed. Battery life, at under 10 hours, was barely adequate.

VERDICT

The Megaplayer is affordable, but you'll need to budget at least another £15 for new headphones. We'd rather spend less on a better flash player or more on a better hard disk player.



SUMMARY

- ✓ Affordable
- ✗ Terrible headphones
- ✗ Basic user interface

HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER 4GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE MS-5540
SUPPLIER www.advancedmp3players.co.uk
DETAILS www.msicomputer.co.uk
HEADPHONES ★

ARCHOS Gmini XS 202s

★★★★

£143 inc VAT

We're not sure how Archos managed to fit everything into the Gmini XS 202s. It's only slightly wider than a 1" hard disk player, but has a 20GB 1.8" disk. It's smaller than players with a similar capacity and is the most affordable of those on test. It feels well made, but falls short of the iPod in style.

Windows treats the Gmini as removable storage; copying music to it with Explorer is fast and easy. Once disconnected from your PC, the player quickly creates its own database from your music's ID3 tags. You can select tracks, albums or artists, or browse the player's folder structure.

The Gmini's large mono screen displays ID3 data and the title of the next track. Sadly, you can't skip tracks during the couple of seconds it takes to retrieve these details, making it a chore to skip just a few songs. Using the player's controls often produced quiet pops through the headphones.

The headphones incorporate a volume control, but they sound weak. We were unimpressed with the player's harsh, muddy sound through our other test headphones. This is the only rechargeable device here that can't replenish its battery from a USB connection. It comes with an AC charger, though, and its battery life of more than 19 hours is excellent.

VERDICT

We like the compact Gmini for its ease of use, long battery life and generous storage capacity. Sadly, its sound quality is disappointing and its headphones aren't up to scratch.



SUMMARY

- ✓ Very compact and affordable
- ✓ Good battery life
- ✗ Below-average sound quality

HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER 20GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE 500810
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.archos.com
HEADPHONES ★★

SONY NW-A3000

★★★★★

£175 inc VAT



Sony's NW-A3000 is a higher-capacity version of the NW-A1000, reviewed in *Shopper* February 2006.

Both remind us of a bar of soap, but the design works better on the larger NW-A3000. It's available in silver or an odd violet colour.

One of our criticisms of the NW-A1000 was that it couldn't play WMA files. Sony has released firmware for both players that corrects this. The upgrade is available from Sony's website and we found it easy to apply.

WMA playback makes the player far more flexible, but it still doesn't support protected files. If you want to buy music online, you're restricted to protected ATRAC files from the Sony Connect online store.

You can copy data files to the NW-A3000 using Windows Explorer, but it plays only music files that have been transferred by Sony's Connect software. This is similar to iTunes, but not as comprehensive or easy to use.

Sony's headphones are as good as the Sennheiser sets iRiver supplies with its players. The NW-A3000 is one of the best-sounding players here through all the headphones we tried.

The NW-A3000 had the best battery life in our tests, lasting over 22 hours. It's a little heavy, but feels solid.

VERDICT

The NW-A3000's lack of support for protected WMA files is restrictive if you plan to buy music online. If you don't, and you can live with its odd looks, its battery life and sound quality make it a great choice.



SUMMARY

- ✓ Great battery life and sound
- ✓ Indestructible feel
- ✗ Soapy styling

HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER 20GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE NWA3000V
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.sony.co.uk
HEADPHONES ★★★★★

PHILIPS GoGear 30GB Jukebox

★★★★

£182 inc VAT

The only buttons on the 30GB Jukebox are a volume rocker and a sliding power/hold switch. All other functions are controlled by icons that glow blue through the black front surface.

This looks stylish and works well at first, but the system is less responsive while the Jukebox is playing. There's often a short delay before the player reacts to input, and scrolling can become erratic and frustrating.

The Jukebox looks great from some angles and unfashionably square from others. Its screen isn't as large or as crisp as the Toshiba Gigabeat's, but pictures have a lot of impact in slideshow mode, where its lights are extinguished and the images stand out from a black background.

Windows identifies the Jukebox as a Portable Media Player. This makes it possible to copy music across in Explorer or synchronise using Media Player 10. The Jukebox supports protected WMA tracks bought from download and subscription sites.

This is the only player here that comes with in-ear headphones, which are inserted further than standard ear buds. Some users will find them uncomfortable, but they come with a choice of fittings and sound excellent. The battery lasted for a disappointing nine hours 12 minutes in our tests.

VERDICT

The Jukebox is Philips' best MP3 player yet, but it's up against some stiff competition. It sounds great and is good value, but it has a comparatively short battery life and can be difficult to control.



SUMMARY

- ✓ Good sound
- ✗ Frustrating controls
- ✗ Below-par battery

HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER 30GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE HDD6320
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.philips.co.uk
HEADPHONES ★★★★★

IRIVER H10 20GB

★★★

£189 inc VAT

iRiver's H10 is available as a compact 6GB player or a full-size 20GB version. We reviewed the preceeding 5GB model in *Shopper* July 2005 and found its battery life a little short. This model did well in our battery tests, lasting over six hours more.

All three iRiver players in this test come with a two-year warranty and are Plays For Sure-compatible for download and subscription services. Like the T30 and U10, the H10 appears as a Portable Media Player in Windows, but it's the only iRiver player that doesn't play OGG Vorbis files.

All three iRivers come with Sennheiser headphones, but the H10's don't sound as good as the others. They seem biased towards the high mid-range and lack the powerful bass response of the MX400s. We tried to compensate for this using the player's equalisation, but boosting the bass setting simply reduced the volume of other frequencies. The H10 produced a satisfactory sound only through our full-size supra-aural headphones.

The H10 has a vertical touch-sensitive scroll bar which requires firm pressure. You can browse music using a file browser or ID3 tag database, but we found it clumsy. The player seems slow to respond when skipping tracks and has an infuriating habit of going into standby when paused.

VERDICT

The 20GB H10 is better than the old 5GB model, but it's bulky and dated. It has a decent radio, but it's only £3 cheaper than the iPod, which plays videos and has 10GB more storage.



SUMMARY

- ✓ Decent battery life
- ✗ Expensive
- ✗ Disappointing sound

HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER 20GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE 3H111X-EUSRU1
SUPPLIER www.advancedmp3players.co.uk
DETAILS www.iriver.eu.com
HEADPHONES ★★★★★

APPLE iPod 30GB

★★★★★

£192 inc VAT

Even if you're not a fan of the iPod's looks, it's hard not to be impressed. The 30GB model here is thinner than any other full-size hard disk player. Its simple lines are broken only by two ports, the circular controller and a hold switch. Each model's details and serial number are etched into its smooth steel back plate.

The latest iPod is a mixture of delight and disappointment. As with all iPods, you must manage the contents with iTunes. It won't play WMA files, but iTunes can transcode them for the iPod. If you want to buy music, you have to use the iTunes store or the few sites that sell unprotected MP3s.

The iPod's circular controller is touch-sensitive, with short cuts for functions such as play/pause. It makes the iPod one of the easiest players to use, but making small scroll movements can be hard. The iPod's large screen displays photos, and video files prepared or converted by Quick Time Pro, but this software isn't included.

With EQ off, the iPod sounds a bit flat. Many of the preset EQ modes lift the bass and treble but introduce distortion to loud bass sounds. This is frustrating in an expensive player and makes an upgrade to bass-heavy headphones a near-necessity.

VERDICT

It's easy to understand the iPod's huge market lead given its great design and ease of use. It's good value for a 30GB player, but its sound quality is disappointing.



SUMMARY

- ✓ Looks great
- ✓ Plenty of storage space
- ✗ Needs better sound

HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER 30GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE MA002FB/A
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.apple.com/uk
HEADPHONES ★★★★★

TOSHIBA Gigabeat 60GB

★★★★★

£272 inc VAT

The Gigabeat is the most expensive player in our test, but with a 60GB disk it is the cheapest hard disk player per megabyte. It's the only player here with a docking cradle and remote. It lacks the iPod's style, but its alloy case is smart.

Turn the Gigabeat on, and its blue illuminated controls and large colour screen liven things up. Its sharp display is matched only the iRiver U10's.

Five buttons, a hold switch and a touch-sensitive cross control the Gigabeat. The cross's functions are context-dependent, and it was easier to use than the function buttons on the side.

Toshiba's headphones sound clear but have little bass. A better set revealed this player's exceptional sound quality at the default equalisation but, as with the iPod, many of its EQ presets introduce distortion.

When using the cradle, Windows recognises the Gigabeat as a Portable Media Device, but at just 0.6MB per second file transfers were slow. When connected directly, Windows recognised our Gigabeat only as removable storage. It wouldn't play music unless it was transferred with the Gigabeat Room software. The player supports music from Plays For Sure stores such as Napster.

VERDICT

The Gigabeat is likable with good all-round performance and plenty of storage. It's expensive, but is great value if you have a huge music collection.



SUMMARY

- ✓ Massive storage
- ✓ Great sound and screen
- ✗ Disappointing headphones

HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER 60GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE MEGF60
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.toshiba.co.uk
HEADPHONES ★★★★★

MP3 PLAYERS

FLASH-BASED PLAYERS

		BUDGET BUY					MOST WANTED		
MANUFACTURER	SUMVISION	APPLE	CREATIVE	IRIVER	ADVANCED MP3 PLAYERS	JENS OF SWEDEN	IRIVER	APPLE	SAMSUNG
Model	SnowFox XT-105	iPod Shuffle 512MB	Zen Nano Plus 512MB	T30 512MB	Pebble 512MB	MP-500 1GB	U10 1GB	iPod Nano 4GB	YP-T8Q
Rating	★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★
Headphones	★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★	Not supplied	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★
HARDWARE									
Capacity (formatted)	No native memory, maximum 1GB card	512MB (487MB)	512MB (489MB)	512MB (496MB)	512MB (504MB)	1GB (971MB)	1GB (962MB)	4GB (3.72GB)	2GB (1.91GB)
Interface	USB	USB	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed
Battery type and charging options	AAA battery	Li-ion, USB	AAA battery	AAA battery	Li-ion, USB	Li-poly, USB or optional charger	Li-poly, USB or optional charger	Li-ion, USB or optional charger	Li-ion, USB or supplied charger
Dimensions (WxDxH)	63x50x15mm	84x25x9mm	66x34x13mm	64x32x22mm	47x32x17mm	81x40x13mm	69x47x16mm	90x40x7mm	83x45x16mm
Weight	50g	22g	22g	27g	24g	51g	70g	42g	55g
FEATURES									
Display	Mono display	None	Mono display, 96x32 pixels	Four-line mono display	Mono OLED display	4.1cm, 260,000 colour LCD, 128x128 pixels	5.6cm colour LCD, 320x240 pixels	3.8cm colour LCD, 176x132 pixels	3.8cm colour screen
Expansion slot	SD/MMC card	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
FM radio	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Record options	Microphone	None	Microphone, line, radio	Microphone, line	Microphone, radio	Microphone, line, radio	Microphone, line, radio	None	Microphone, line, radio
Supplied with	Neck strap/headphones, AAA battery, USB cable	Bud headphones, neck strap	Bud headphones, neck strap, 3.5mm audio cable, AAA battery, USB cable	Bud headphones, USB cable, neck strap, AAA battery	Bud headphones, proprietary USB cable, belt clip	USB cable	Bud headphones, soft pouch, proprietary USB cable	Bud headphones, soft pouch, proprietary USB cable, dock insert	Bud headphones, charger, USB cable, USB host cable, 3.5mm audio, soft case
TEST RESULTS									
Battery life	8h 21m	14h 49m	14h 27m	13h 08m	8h 52m	12h 54m	19h 54m	12h 30m	15h 35m
500MB transfer speed (software)	9m 08s (Explorer)	5m 08s (iTunes)*	4m 19s (Explorer)	4m 54s (Explorer)	2m 46s (Explorer)	1m 22s (Explorer)	4m 32s (Explorer)	1m 12s (iTunes)*	49.5s (Explorer)
Supported audio formats	MP3, WMA, Wav	MP3, AAC, protected AAC, M4A, M4B, M4P, Audible, Wav	MP3, WMA, Audible	MP3, WMA, OGG, ASF	MP3, WMA, ASF	MP3, WMA, OGG	MP3, WMA, OGG, ASF	MP3, AAC, protected AAC, Apple lossless, AIFF, Wav	MP3, WMA, OGG, ASF
Supported image formats	None	None	None	None	None	JPEG	JPEG	JPEG, BMP, GIF, TIFF, PSD (Mac only), PNG	JPEG
Supported video formats	None	None	None	None	None	MP4 (transcoder supplied for other formats)	MP4 (maximum 15fps)	None	MP4
Download compatibilities	N/A	iTunes	Plays For Sure download	Plays For Sure download/subscription	N/A, expected in forthcoming firmware upgrade	DRM 9	Plays For Sure download/subscription	iTunes	DRM 9
BUYING INFORMATION									
Price (per megabyte)	£24	£47 (9.2p)	£53 (10.4p)	£69 (13.5p)	£79 (15.4p)	Around £134 (13p)	£139 (13.6p)	£168 (4.1p)	£179 (8.7p)
Warranty duration and terms	One year RTB	One year RTB	One year RTB	Two years RTB	One year RTB	Six months RTB	Two years RTB	One year RTB	One year RTB
Supplier	www.advancedmp3players.co.uk	www.amazon.co.uk	www.dabs.com	www.advancedmp3players.co.uk	Advanced MP3 Players, 0131 273 4387	Jens of Sweden, 0046 21 470 5900	www.amazon.co.uk	www.amazon.co.uk	www.advancedmp3players.co.uk
Details	www.sumvision.com	www.apple.com/uk	http://europe.creative.com	www.iriver.eu.com	www.advancedmp3players.co.uk	www.jensofsweden.com	www.iriver.eu.com	www.apple.com/uk	www.samsung.co.uk
Part code	XT105	M97248/A	70PF163200023	3T305A-EUWGX1	Pebble-512	MP-500	3U10VX	MA107FB/A	YP-T8Q

HARD DISK-BASED PLAYERS

		BEST BUY					
MANUFACTURER	MSI	ARCHOS	SONY	PHILIPS	IRIVER	APPLE	TOSHIBA
Model	Megaplayer 540	Gmini XS 202s	NW-A3000	GoGear 30GB Jukebox	H10 20GB	iPod 30GB	Gigabeat 60GB
Rating	★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★	★★★★★
Headphones	★	★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★
HARDWARE							
Capacity (formatted)	4GB (3.8GB)	20GB (18.6GB)	20GB (18.2GB)	30GB (27.9GB)	20GB (18.6GB)	30GB (27.8GB)	60GB (55.8GB)
Interface	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed
Battery type and charging options	Li-ion, USB or supplied charger	Li-ion, USB or supplied charger	Li-ion, USB or supplied charger	Li-ion, USB or supplied charger	Li-ion, USB or supplied charger	Li-ion, USB or optional charger	Li-ion, USB or supplied charger
Dimensions (WxDxH)	96x52x17mm	76x59x17mm	105x66x22mm	104x64x17mm	102x61x22mm	104x61x11mm	106x63x16mm
Weight	95g	118g	182g	150g	163g	136g	170g
FEATURES							
Display	4.6cm colour LCD, 128x160 pixels	5.1cm mono display, 128x128 pixels	Mono display	5.1cm, 65,000 colour LCD, 220x176 pixels	4.6cm, 260,000 colour LCD	6.4cm, 65,000 colour LCD, 320x240 pixels	5.6cm, 264,000 colour LCD
Expansion slot	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
FM radio	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Record options	Microphone, radio	None	None	Microphone	Microphone, line, radio	None	None
Supplied with	Bud headphones, charger, USB cable, USB host cable, 3.5mm audio cable	Bud headphones, charger, USB cable	Bud headphones, USB cable	Bud headphones (in-ear), charger, soft pouch, USB cable	Bud headphones, charger	Bud headphones, USB cable, dock adaptor, soft pouch	Bud headphones, charger, cradle, wired remote, USB cable
TEST RESULTS							
Battery life	9h 34m	19h 09m	22h 02m	9h 12m	14h 40m	13h 10m	14h 04,
500MB transfer speed (software)	2m 15s (Explorer)	2m 07s (Explorer)	2m 04s (Connect)	1m 15s (Explorer)	1m 22s (Explorer)	1m 12s (iTunes)*	1m 55s (Gigabeat Room)
Supported audio formats	MP3, WMA, Wav	MP3, WMA, Wav	MP3, WMA (firmware update necessary), ATRAC3, ATRAC3 plus	MP3, WMA, Wav	MP3, WMA, ASF	MP3, AAC, protected AAC, Apple lossless, AIFF, Wav	MP3, WMA, Wav
Supported image formats	JPEG	None	None	JPEG	JPEG	JPEG, BMP, GIF, TIFF, PSD (Mac only), PNG	JPEG
Supported video formats	M-JPEG	None	None	None	None	M4V, MP4, MOV	None
Download compatibilities	DRM 9	Plays For Sure download	Sony Connect	Plays For Sure download/subscription	Plays For Sure download/subscription	iTunes	Plays For Sure download/subscription
BUYING INFORMATION							
Price (per megabyte)	£129 (3.1p)	£143 (0.70p)	£175 (0.85p)	£182 (0.59p)	£189 (0.92p)	£192 (0.62p)	£272 (0.44p)
Warranty duration and terms	Two years RTB	One year RTB	One year RTB	One year RTB	Two years RTB	One year RTB	One year RTB
Supplier	www.advancedmp3players.co.uk	www.dabs.com	www.dabs.com	www.amazon.co.uk	www.advancedmp3players.co.uk	www.amazon.co.uk	www.dabs.com
Details	www.msi.computer.co.uk	www.archos.com	www.sony.co.uk	www.philips.co.uk	www.iriver.eu.com	www.apple.com/uk	www.toshiba.co.uk
Part code	MS-5540	500810	NWA3000V	HDD6320	3H111X-EUSRU1	MA002FB/A	MEGF60

* WMA tracks converted to AAC before the test

Labs Verdict MP3 players

Whether you want a skip-proof player for the gym or a device that'll house your entire library, we have just the thing.

If you want an inexpensive player, we recommend Creative's Zen Nano Plus. It has no rechargeable battery, but it sounds good, is easy to use and includes an FM radio. It's our Budget Buy winner. iRiver's U10 is a gorgeous flash-based player, but it's pricy. It wins our Most Wanted award.

For a larger player that holds more music, the choice depends on whether you intend to buy music online. If you want to use a Plays For Sure service such as Napster, pick Toshiba's Gigabeat. It sounds great, holds a huge amount of music and works with protected WMA files. If you don't want to buy music online, though, or you prefer Sony's Connect music store, pick the Sony NW-A3000. It may look like a bar of soap, but it's an excellent music player with a superb battery and brilliant sound quality. It's our Best Buy winner. 

Flash memory-based players

 **Creative Zen Nano Plus 512MB**
★★★★★



 **iRiver U10 1GB**
★★★★★



Hard disk based player

 **Sony NW-A3000**
★★★★★

